

In May 1781, George Washington was discouraged after six years of war. In his diary, he wrote: "Instead of having our arsenals well supplied with military stores, they are poorly provided. . . . Instead of having the prospect of a glorious offensive campaign before us, we have a bewildered and gloomy defensive one."

The American commander feared that the war would drag on. But in October, a British officer would raise the white flag of surrender, and the war would come to an end. As you will read, geography played a role in that surrender.

THE PATH TO YORKTOWN

Early in 1781, the British General Charles Cornwallis believed that with a few more troops he could hold Virginia. He wrote to Sir Henry Clinton, the top British commander in New York, asking for more men.

Clinton rejected the request. Instead, he ordered Cornwallis to send 3,000 men to New York, where Clinton believed that Washington was planning an attack. Further, Clinton instructed Cornwallis to take up a position at Portsmouth, Williamsburg, or Yorktown, Virginia. He left the choice to the general.

Cornwallis chose Yorktown. Overall, it looked to be a good choice. It lay at the mouth of the York River on a peninsula that juts into the Chesapeake Bay. The river was deep enough to accommodate large ships.

The British navy in American waters outnumbered that of the Americans and their French allies. Cornwallis, therefore, felt secure that ships could bring food, arms, and more troops if needed. What Cornwallis did not know was that Admiral de Grasse in command of a large French fleet in the West Indies was about to sail northward.

SPRINGING THE TRAP

In mid-August, Washington was delighted to learn that the French fleet had left the West Indies bound for the Chesapeake. He took decisive action.

First, he moved troops around to convince Clinton that an attack on New York was likely. Next, he linked up American forces with troops newly arrived from France under the Comte de Rochambeau. The combined army marched rapidly south. In Virginia, they joined other Patriot forces commanded by Lafayette and closed in on Yorktown. For the first time in the war, an army of American and French soldiers outnumbered the British.

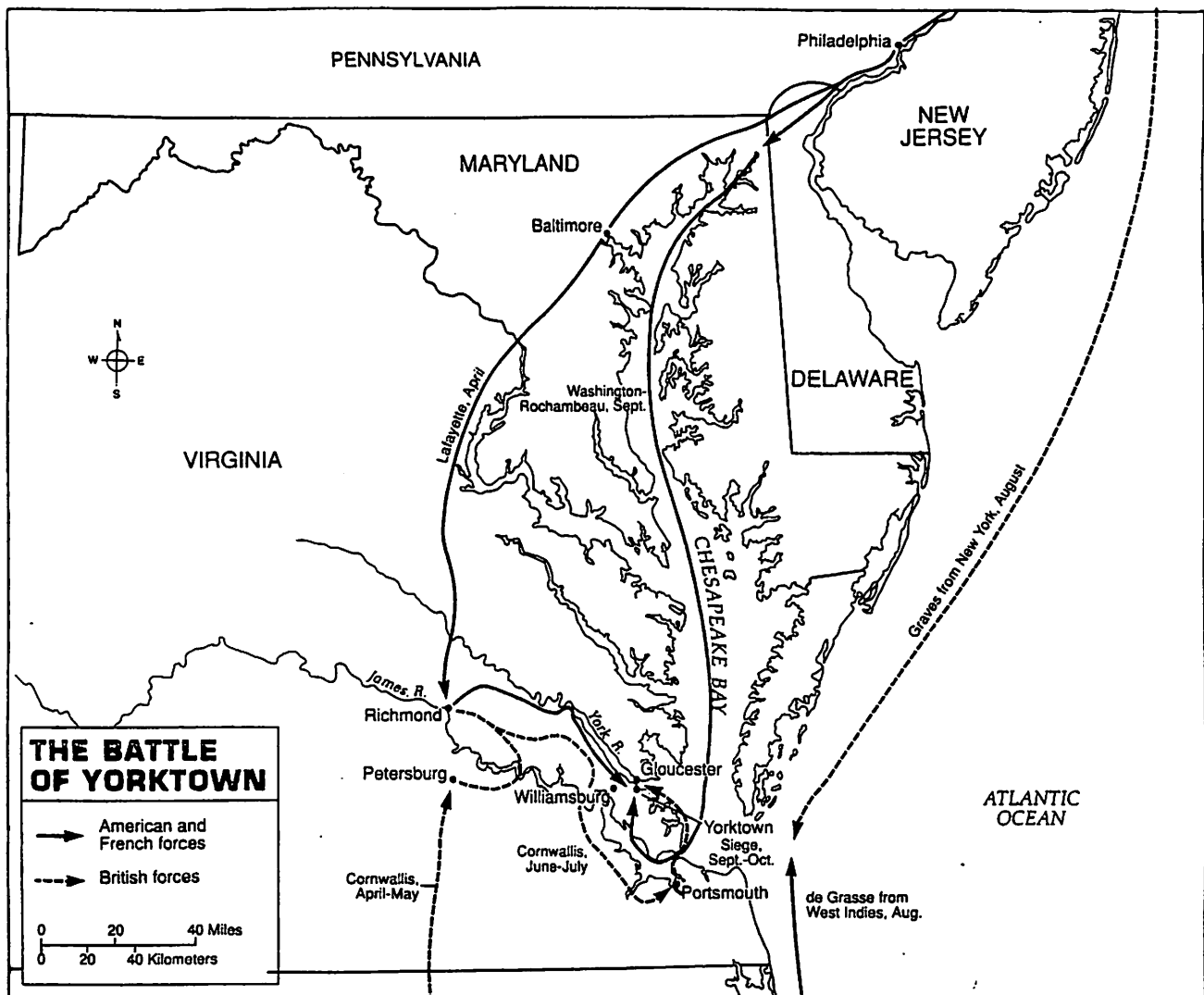
In New York, Clinton did not hear of the allied advance until early September. Although Cornwallis knew that Washington's army was pushing south, he remained calm. British ships, he believed, could reinforce him or evacuate his forces to safety if the need should arise.

Imagine the general's shock when he learned that the 23 ships sailing into the Chesapeake were French, not British. Forces on land and by sea were closing the trap.

In New York, Clinton finally realized the danger facing Cornwallis. He ordered Admiral Graves to sail south to rescue the trapped army. Outside the Chesapeake Bay, French and British ships met. For days, they circled, firing on one another. Neither side won a clear victory, but several British ships were damaged. Finally, Admiral Graves ordered the British ships to return to New York. Graves's departure sealed Cornwallis's fate.

As allied forces advanced, Cornwallis hatched a desperate plan to send his army across the York River to Gloucester and overland to New York. During a fierce storm, the British rowed toward Gloucester, but strong winds blew them back to Yorktown. By dawn, only a few rain-drenched soldiers had reached Gloucester. They could not march north safely. Bitterly disappointed, they returned to Yorktown.

The surrounding troops moved on the British position, making the end certain. On October 19, to the beat of military drums, more than 7,000 British troops put down their weapons, prisoners on the Yorktown peninsula.



Using the essay and the map, answer the following questions on a separate sheet of paper.

A. FOCUS ON GEOGRAPHY

- 1. Location** (a) From what direction did Cornwallis enter Virginia? (b) Which forces occupied the western part of the Yorktown peninsula when the siege began?
- 2. Place** (a) What characteristics made Yorktown a good choice for Cornwallis's forces? (b) What made it a poor choice?
- 3. Interaction** Why was the battle of Yorktown lost even before any serious fighting took place between British and American troops?
- 4. Movement** Why was the British navy essential to any British victory in America?
- 5. Region** What is a distinctive geographic feature of the tidewater region of the Chesapeake Bay?

B. CRITICAL THINKING

- 1. Analyzing** Do you think Cornwallis could have avoided defeat if he had set up his position at Portsmouth or Williamsburg? Explain.
- 2. Defending a Position** Is it correct to say that geography defeated the British at Yorktown? Explain.